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Disenchantment in the Tatras. The Vulnerability of the “Pocket Alps” (Slovakia)

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Michel Lompech

- ¹ On 19 November 2004, a violent storm struck the Slovakian slopes of the Tatras. Once stripped, the slopes revealed a variety of stations and unveiled the scars of ski slopes on the landscape. However, this catastrophe, beyond being an environmental crisis, revealed the significant vulnerability of this mountain range, which is popular with tourists, and the apparent fragility of these “pocket Alps”. One hypothesis claims that the area’s vulnerability to hazards is, above all, due to development, both societal and natural (Magnan, 2012) and the dimensions of vulnerability that may be structural, economic, social or institutional (George-Marcepoil in Vlès 2016). This outline can be transposed onto the trajectory of the Tatras, in the context of specific high mountains in Central Europe marked by the rise and fall of political regimes. During the communist period, the appearance of mass tourism in a national park created an unprecedented spatial matrix that made a decisive change to the connection with the mountainous environment; this led to the first fundamental environmental vulnerability. The post-communist years modernised new structural weaknesses resulting from the attractiveness of the tourist destination or from the instability of station management methods. This work requires a recounting of the path of development. On a spatial-temporal level, these mountains are characterised by different paces of development and the rearrangement of actors during the transition stage (1990-2002). The term trajectory is currently used in geography to describe the temporal dimension of the transformation process (Maurel, 2009) and the discriminating factors : planning cycle, small events, path dependency, locking effect, changes of direction (Bouneau, 2016). Different approaches of changing systems have theorised its use, either in understanding the developments as necessary stages towards a desired situation (transition theory), or with regard to the different developments of systems and institutions in the changes (dependency theory). In the vulnerability study, it is a question of locating, across the history of this mountain range, the inflection points that led to an increasingly unstable societal/environmental

balance. Analysing a variety of publications that trace the history (Bohuš, 1982, 2008, Marec, 2010) or study storms (Falňan, 2010, Kunca, 2006), various websites¹ and interviews with representatives of communities and other researchers² identifies the past levels of vulnerability going back to before the communist period (cf. timeline).

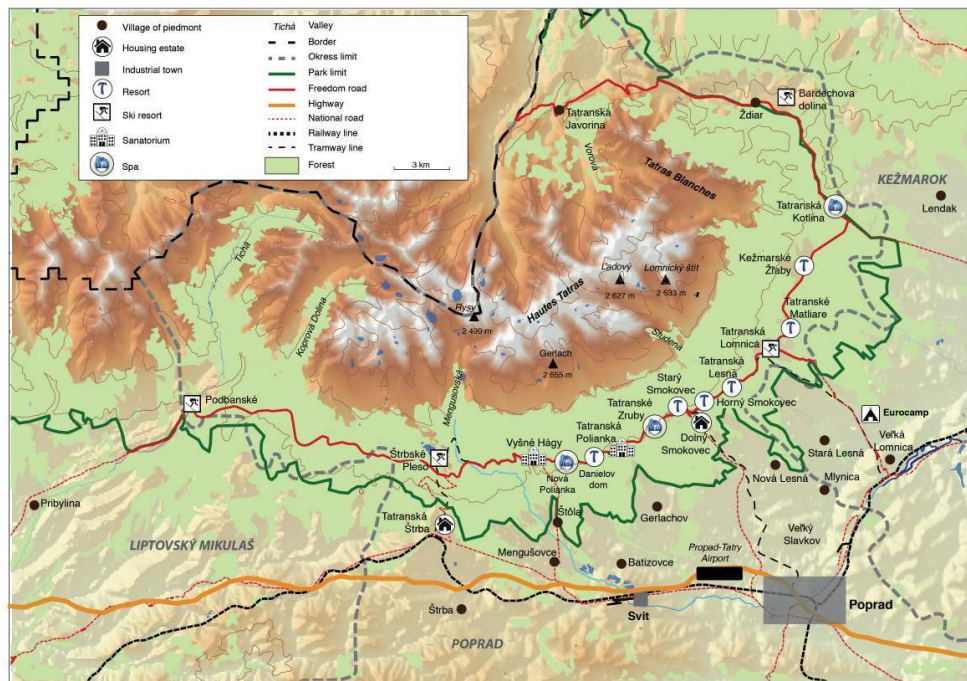
- 2 In order to identify the different stages of the formation of this vulnerability, we initially looked at the ways in which the mountain range is exposed to types of natural or man-made crises at different paces. It was then necessary to review the various moments in the territorial transformation linked to the transition from an agroforestry economy to a fully-fledged tourist destination. The communist period created a new spatial matrix that made a decisive change to the relationship with the environment. Lastly, 20 years ago, the trajectory followed showed a rearrangement of the region, which is extremely vulnerable to hazards, caused by evolution marked by a number of ruptures, both of a societal and natural context.

The Tatras exposed to all the elements

Small and high mountains

- 3 The Tatras make up a “high mountain” region unique to Central Europe. This mountain range, shared between Slovakia (80%) and Poland, is of a modest size (26 km long by less than 10 km wide). The summit areas affected by glacial erosion (lakes, forms of accumulation) and high summits (ten of which are higher than 2,500 m) are directly linked to the edge of a plateau at 1,000 m that is exposed to the south, while several valleys go deep into the mountainous area (Tychá, Studená, Monková). The lack of a chain in front offers a clear view of the Spiš and Liptov basins and the thick forests of spruces and mountain pines that cover these slopes. With its both continental and mountainous climate, landscapes and impressive peaks, the Tatras offer real “high mountain” conditions. They truly are “the littlest large mountains”, as they are also fondly known. It is also the largest tourist area in Slovakia, although other regions have stations (Low Tatras, Orava, Fatras...). The edge of the plateau is the most developed on the tourist map with several ski and spa stations, while to the east, the Biela valley is characterised by Ždiar (1,370 inhabitants) and the Bachdelová dolina station, while to the west, the chain stretches out to the lone figure of Podbanské station.

Tourism infrastructure in the Slovak Tatras



Realisation : M. Lompech, 2018. With UMR Territoires mapping service, 2018.

The environmental cycles and their crises

- 4 In 2004, the violence of storm Alžbeta and the extent of the damage caught the attention of those who saw this as a sign of climate change. This extreme event can be explained by the Tatras' own climate conditions, where the autumn atmospheric circulation accumulates masses of cold Arctic air in the long valleys of the northern slopes. This meets the overheated air from the south, creating violent winds that no mass of flora could withstand, especially here where it is made up of spruces with shallow roots.
- 5 However, the depth of the region's history put this crisis in perspective and provided information on the natural hazards native to these mountains, their impact and the responses of local stakeholders. Storms have been recorded since the first known one in 1898: in 1915 around Dom Danielov, in 1925 at Podbanské and others at the end of the 1920s. In 1941, a similar phenomenon caused huge damage in the Tichá and Koprová valleys (320,000 m³ of uprooted trees across all the Tatras). In 1961, then 1999 and 2000, wind bowled over the forest at Podbanské. Therefore, the speed of wind is a real risk and a hazard factor in these mountains and the catastrophe of 2004 is one of a continuing series. Four storms have been recorded from this date³. The torrential rain in the river network also presents other natural hazards. In addition, during a downpour that fell at the end of June 1958 (200 mm/24 hours), rivers burst their banks, carrying away bridges and wooden houses, submerging the Tatranská Lomnica tram stop and flooding nine communities in Liptov. This kind of torrential rain is a frequent occurrence: Tatranská Lomnica in 1965, Podbanské in 1980. In 2008, villagers in the lower part of Ždiar found themselves under the waters of the Biela river. The Tatras thus form a specific mountain ecosystem subjected to the environmental crises that make up its varied climate. The

ecosystem's exposure to hazards also includes man-made risks, primarily fires, the largest of which happened in the Koprová valley in 1941. The flames reached up to 1,800 m, spread across the two slopes and 240 ha went up in smoke.

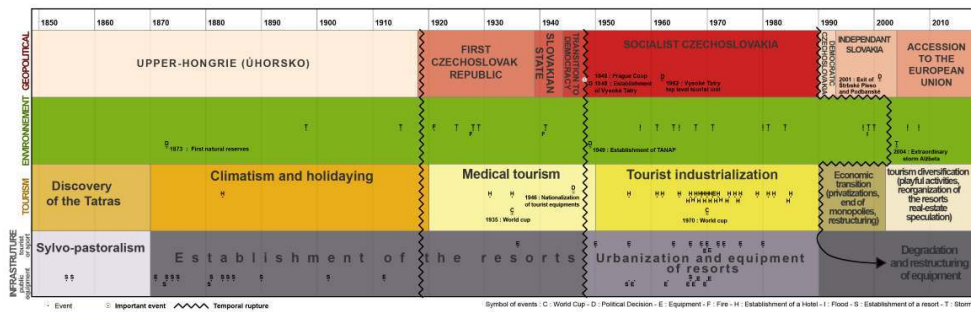
- 6 Although the epicentre of Alžbeta was at Vyšné Hágy, the damage reached from Podbanské to Kežmarský Žľaby (12,600 ha, around $\frac{2}{3}$ of national forest); there were 3 million m³ of uprooted trees. However, its impact did not stop at this climatic event. The management of silviculture work (treatment of uprooted trees, replanting) is at the centre of conflict between TANAP National Park and property owners. The European spruce bark beetle, which is harmful to spruces, multiplies in the trees on the ground and high valleys that were preserved by the storm. However, the park forbids all treatment using insecticide or heavy engineering within the sanctuary areas, giving an opportunity for natural regeneration. The damage caused by the beetles was twice that caused by the storm. Since 2005, more than 2 million trees have been affected, despite TANAP having planted 5 million plants between 2004 and 2013⁴. Forest landowner associations condemn this management that is prolonging indefinitely the ecological crisis. They also note that, even if natural regeneration can be observed in the northern forests of Siberia or Canada, the Tatras are of a completely different nature and it once again becomes a question of scale.
- 7 The territorial structure of the Tatras therefore exposes the area to serious environmental crises. Extreme natural phenomena are ongoing and show the varied climate of the mountains. The generalisation of the tourist industry in the mountains and its construction in a recreational space changed the response to these risks. The importance of investments and the national image of the Tatras in the country increased public awareness of these risks. After the storm, the stations were entirely bare and the recreation of the forest required a long period of time, in contradiction with the profit demands of the tourism-related facilities. The mark of stations on the landscape is very clear and the aftermath of the storm intensified this visual impact.

From mining and aristocratic mountains to a tourist town

Villages and the mountains

- 8 Before the construction of the stations, there were no permanent habitats in these mountainous and forest surroundings and villages were located in the foothills at a fairly low altitude. They were all originally German: in Stará Lesná (*Alt Walddorf*), Gerlachov (*Gearlsdorf*), Mlynica (*Milymbach*), German colonies had been exploiting the mineral resources of the Tatras since the Middle Ages. In the mid-19th century, the unfortunate farmers eroded the slopes with both pastoral and forest clearings to such an extent that the managers of spa resorts and protectors of the environment asked the state to establish protected areas. This dispute in the 1930s prepared for the exclusion of pastoralism to the edge of the park, which was established in 1948. Agriculture thus faded from the mountains in favour of a zone that was both protected to preserve natural richness and specialising in recreation and leisure.

Tourism and forms of vulnerability in the Slovak Tatras



Design by M. Lompech, 2018, (from Marec, 2010 ; <http://www.lesmedium.sk/> ; <http://www.lesytanap.sk>). Execution Julien Chadeyron.

- 9 The villages of the foothills plateau (Dolná Lesná, Stará Lesná, Veľká Lomnica) worked for this tourism industry that appeared at their altitude. The farmers opened ski slopes, built the first lodges, drew tourist maps and guided the first mountaineers. At the end of the war, all of these German communities were exiled (Pollák, Švorc, 2015) and the village communities were reduced to a third of their size up in the mountains. The age-old cycle of mountain farming was broken by this brutal deterritorialisation that required the movement of populations and a new division of space. This rupture established a new stage in managing the mountains that was focused on tourism and run by the government.

From discovery to the tourist city

- 10 At the end of the 19th century, tourists came from all over Austria-Hungary, opening up the Tatras to the outside world. Starý Smokovec, Tatranská Lomnica and Štrbské Pleso were originally spa and climatic localities with hotels and spas, summer residences and hunting lodges with an upper class clientele. The collapse of the empire changed this sense of societal isolation built on natural resources and the mountainous setting. These first-generation stations took another view and uses of the mountains became more sensitive to climatic and political changes⁵. In 1920, the directors of the Tatranská Lomnica and Štrbské Pleso establishments wanted to be independent of the municipality in order to improve the level of equipment at their facilities and the new country of Czechoslovakia was prepared to rule in their favour. With the communities of the foothills being of an entirely different opinion, there was considerable tension between “these spa gentlemen” and the villagers. The latter reproached them for resembling the old Upper Hungary rather than Czechoslovakia and for looking to keep property on their lands. In the following decade, a bill on the Tatras suggested an autonomous jurisdiction in the Tatras that would be placed under the control of the Health Ministry and was met with similar opposition (Bohuš, 2008). After the Liberation, men linked to the anti-fascist fight took control of local power and liquidated the ownership rights of German farmers, changing the order and marking a junction in the mountains’ trajectory.
- 11 In 1945, a new community called “High Tatras”, *Vysoké Tatry*, was created in the Javorina forest locality, stretching from the Polish border to Podbanské in Liptov. This encompassed the entire area (404 km²) and included an urban element (5,213 inhabitants in 1948). This area specialised in spa activities as well as tourism. The opening of the

“Road of Liberation” in the 1950s linked the localities into a new management unit. This made a significant contribution to a bifurcation in the territorial trajectory where the formerly isolated tourist area became a unique urban town.

Protecting nature

- 12 The cycle of protecting the mountain environment was put in place at the start of the 20th century with the establishment of the Carpathians of Upper Hungary Association⁶ (*Uhorský karpatský spolok*) after storms and fires. Throughout the 1920s, the new republic increased natural reserves for threatened species (edelweiss, marmots, chamois) in certain areas (Kriváň, Popradské Pleso), forbidding access to certain ridges (Lomnický hrebeň) and restricting hunting rights. The Cracow agreements of 1924⁷ planned the creation of a protected area for flora and fauna, which was the beginnings of a cross-border national park and a prospect that greatly displeased the farmers living in the foothills. However, the politico-ethnic tensions of the 1930s stopped the situation in the Spiš and all of Slovakia, while the departure of German populations and the regime change favoured the creation of the Tatras National Park (*Tatranský Národný Park*, TANAP) in 1948. Although it seemed like an environmental protection policy was going to be confirmed, it was a ten-year wait until a law defined its mission: “to preserve nature and the Tatras region in an unaltered state”. Its first director, a forestry engineer, was an obstacle to various development projects and was quickly dismissed and replaced by someone outside of ecological issues who nevertheless surrounded himself with a competent team and finished by giving up because his mission appeared impossible. Between 1950 and 1960, the function was then carried out directly by the *Obecný Národný Výbor* (national community committee), an administrative level that exercises local powers. The preservation of the environment was clearly conditional on the political goal of building a tourist town. This small event had a long-term influence on the trajectory of these mountains by making environmental decisions depend on the priorities of the tourism industry.

The “pocket Alps” dressed up as the big ones

- 13 The High Tatras became the laboratory for a communist tourism project. This was the main moment, the period of creating a vital spatial matrix that altered the relationship with the environment, vulnerability in the face of crises and the development possibilities in the region’s trajectory. The second president of communist Czechoslovakia, Antonín Zapotocký (1953-1957), continued the collectivist project for these high mountains “to manage the Tatras so that they become a place of joy, happiness and relaxation for workers and their valleys are filled with the laughter of children” (Marec, 2015). Officials exploited a legal loophole in the decree to establish the new town of Vysoké Tatry, which was not defined by intramuros limits⁸ and also asserted that the law did not create an area dependent on the park, but only protected by it. Although the town was deprived of town planning, buildings were constructed according to a system of urban derogation that eventually became the standard. It was therefore a cycle of tourism-related industrialisation that was put in place during the last twenty years of communism.

A powerful spatial matrix

- 14 These stations were based on basic equipment and organised around a sole ski slope served by a single mechanical lift and one option for accommodation. The most recent, and partially incomplete, station at Podbanské offers a more simple option: it has been reduced to two hotels located at two ends of the same slope and separated by a large undeveloped space. In this model, the localities take the form of a linear park. This leisure-based urbanisation resulted in a variety of operations according to the decisions of works councils and negotiations between decision-makers. This explains why there is no urban centre, if it is not at Smokovec. These stations do not have a holiday atmosphere and are somewhat devoid of activity, particularly in the evening, when the lack of architectural harmony is particularly noticeable. The architecture of the 1970s is completely out of step with the mountainous surroundings, resulting in the building of, for example, the pyramid-shaped *Panorama* hotel in Štrbské Pleso or the circular *Atrium Hotel* in Nový Smokovec and a parallelepiped for a supermarket, etc. In 1974, as part of an international gathering, the huge open-air Tatranská Lomnica Eurocamp site was set up further down to host 6,000 people, 1,500 tents and caravans, plus chalets. These tourism amenities were a complementary addition to the ski stations that were of middling quality and already full.
- 15 Another feature of these stations was their range of functions. Here, the development model for tourism did not specialise in one area, but catered to a wide range including thermal baths, sanatoriums, sports facilities, hotels and buildings, even if one activity dominated each station: winter sports at Štrbské Pleso, Tatranská Lomnica and Podbanské, medical tourism at Vyšné Hágy and therapy tourism at Tatranská Polianka, spas at Tatranská Kotlina and holidaying in Smokovec.
- 16 The planning stage interpreted the increase in the number of visitors as the result of an upgrade, although it could hardly be attributed to the value of the offer, with the clientele largely being captive and from the Communist Bloc. In addition, East Germans could travel only to Czechoslovakia and represented up to two-thirds of the visitors to Vysoké Tatry for a number of years. As for citizens of Czechoslovakia, they had the option of social accommodation initiatives, visits to which were not linked to the quality of service.
- 17 The natural space, officially protected by the park, was not in fact actually conserved. The planning considered it available for facilities that would be useful for the collective interest. Furthermore, to create areas for skiing, the old-growth forest of Hrebienok was cut down in 1956, then the forest on hills of Lomnický štít in 1959 and, ten years later, one of the last forests of mountain pines disappeared from the side of Solisko. In addition, a number of mechanical lifts were set up to reach the summits: funicular (Hrebienok), cable cars, gondolas (at Skalnaté pleso in 1971), various ski lifts and the number of facilities increased everywhere: mountain hotels around the Popradské pleso and Velecké pleso lakes, large buildings constructed deep within the interior of the park in the Monková valley (White Tatras).
- 18 The unfinished state is characteristic of these spaces that were the result of a planned economy. The demographic forecasts that aimed to create a real town were overestimated and are barely half completed, with several facilities (ice rink, palace of culture) never being built. Although the various plans continued the urbanisation of the

mountains by increasing its capacities for visitor numbers while ignoring conservation measures, they had no proposals for other localities (Vyšné Hágy, Tatranská Kotlina), even though spas were the origin of its urban development. Such is the "spatial matrix", both colossal and deficient, produced by massive tourist industrialisation that had a decisive impact of the trajectory of the High Tatras. This cycle of development brought short-term responses to the trajectory built from tourism but accentuated in the long term the mountains' vulnerability to weather hazards and rendered them dependent on the external economic situation.

A saturated mountain space

- 19 These choices considerably increased the capacity for tourism and mass-market visits. In the summer of 1976, peak traffic was 1,240 vehicles an hour at Starý Smokovec and 1,700 at Tatranská Lomnica. Four to five million people drove to Vysoké Tatry every year, coming not necessarily for the natural beauty but often to buy rare products, sometimes even a car!⁹ Estimates doubled between 1960 and 1980: every day, 5,300 people climbed Skalnaté Pleso, 500 made it to the top of Kriváň or Rysy and 23,500 took the chairlift to the top of Solisko every day (Richez, 1992). The romantic period at the start of the century when 7,000 to 8,000 people visited the Tatras every year was over and would not return.
- 20 Measures looked to limit these flows. Starting in the autumn of 1980, the park administration closed access to the hiking trails on a seasonal basis and set up tolls at the access roads to the valleys. Traffic was blocked starting from the Eurocamp site, providing shuttlebuses to prevent visitors from using their own cars, which paradoxically resulted in attracting caravans. In 1987, there was a hopeless attempt to forbid car traffic in view of the chaos in which the entire national park found itself. The situation had become unmanageable and the development of the mountains provided an example of the multiple spatial inconsistencies of the communist system, which was one of the causes of its ultimate collapse.

Little mountains in a big leisure market

The mountains dismantled

- 21 The economic transition unfolded in Vysoké Tatry in accordance with the series of privatisation measures in Czechoslovakia. The sales operations of large establishments took place during the major privatisation of 1992 or by mutual agreement (government of Vladimír Mečiar, 1992-1996) and the majority of transactions were carried out between senior officials living outside the Tatras and far from the tourist sector. These financial manoeuvres led to a disorganised division of hotels and facilities between the new managers and self-proclaimed investors who, outside of networks allowing them to win tenders, had no funds, nor managerial experience in the tourism industry and were of no benefit to an actual project. The economic transition created a new bifurcation in the mountains' trajectory. The absence of a permanent population that forged old connections to the region weakened its ability to respond to the shocks of the transition. These privatisation methods explain the wait-and-see attitude and deterioration of some facilities, in line with the slowing trajectory of the Slovakian transition between 1993 and

1999, which was enhanced by the collapse of purchasing power and the appearance of competing destinations (Fatras, Orava, Austria). The economic model built around the monopoly of the “high mountains” in the Communist Bloc fell in a open world and there was even a shortage of the Slovakian clientele as Bratislava found itself at an equal distance from the Tatras and the Alpine valleys of Austria were better equipped with much more spread-out skiing areas. The Tatras had finally proved to be not very competitive. This low level of attraction becomes evident in the socio-economic trajectory as a locking effect: stakeholders in the tourism industry had to manage deteriorated mountain spaces and low-profit facilities and were in a jumble of disputes (derogatory urbanism, presence of a town in a national park, restoration of property rights, municipal autonomy).

Wastelands in mountains

- 22 This period of uncertainty in addition to the trend of deterioration revealed the low level of competitiveness in this model of tourism-related industrialisation that proved to be highly vulnerable in a competitive world open to the market economy. Several establishments were abandoned because of unregulated privatisation: the *Stavbar* hotel at the entrance to Tatranská Štrba, the MS 70 hotel in Nový Smokovec, *Kupelný Dom* and the *Prior* supermarket in Tatranská Lomnica. Lastly, the Eurocamp site must be mentioned. The market economy dealt a heavy blow in lowering its visitor numbers whilst simultaneously increasing its maintenance costs. During the new gathering that attracted 5,000 caravans in 1992, the road network proved incapable of absorbing the flow of cars. It was the final blow for this site and the illusion that the Tatras had an integrated layout that resembled a whole. Instead, some areas of homes and chalets were divided up and, in another area, an Irish developer opened a golf course and developed a futuristic “mountain property” project that either still has very low occupancy or only exists on the real estate agency billboards. The rest is a tourism wasteland. These types of “vacant places” (Bachimon, 2013) are scattered across the mountains and the many ruins inherited from the wrong choice of location are a reminder of the overinflated or forgotten functional reasoning of communism. The results of a disruptive transition, this level of abandonment harms both the image of a national park protecting nature and the affectation of a reputation as a prestigious station in the high mountains.

Renovate, reorganise, renew

- 23 For investors, there is a strong temptation to fill undeveloped space. However, Vysoké Tatry is located inside the park and new projects require dispensations. The current revival of existing buildings is down to real estate transactions that organise coownership (hotels transformed into residential buildings) and the renovation of hotel resorts, like at Smokovec and Tatranská Lomnica. To balance out the insufficient parking space, offset the weak offer of services and improve the functioning of the ski slopes, a multitude of details need to be fixed to come together to make a modern station.
- 24 However, it is not possible to have an idea adapted to tourism and its development without urban tools that have been adapted accordingly. Therefore, there must be a review of the TANAP classification and a definition of an intramuros limit for Vysoké Tatry, which would make it possible to get out of the regime of urban deterioration and

would simplify renovation operations. However, this comes back to investing in what already exists and forbidding all future expansions! Since another zoning plan has been under review, several ministers have handed down the Environment portfolio but, in the meantime, developers seem to have a *carte blanche* to urbanise the base of the slopes located outside the protected zone of the park. The creation of a property bubble is evident in the expansion of developed spaces around the new tourist complexes (golf courses, swimming pools, accommodation) and private housing developments that absorb the villages in the foothills. A similar property expansion can be observed in Smokovec and Lomnica, which are developing at a higher rate than their demographic growth. The cycle of construction, in a slower period, is picking up again but does not always take into account the durability of the mountain ecosystem.

- 25 In addition, the park's goal is to preserve the incredibly rich wild fauna (chamois, lynx, wolves, bears) but managing their presence in this space where urbanisation and natural reserve mix is a delicate process. Bears pose the greatest difficulty as there is a population of around 138 in the Tatras. This situation means that they become accustomed to people ("tolerance" for zoologists) and they roam the outskirts of Vysoké Tatry and eat from bins while tourists approach, not without risk! TANAP teams are intervening to repel them and residents want to close off their homes to prevent these incursions, which would change the appearance of these residential areas. Protecting animals proves to be a delicate task in an urban context!

Interplay of stakeholders in the High Tatras

- 26 The transformation trajectory has thus introduced several stakeholders who are involved in these mountains, which are simultaneously a natural park, recreational site and place of residence. Their actions may coincide when financiers invest in stations or when municipalities (Štrba, Vysoké Tatry) look to appropriate tourism expertise. They may also differ in their ideas for planning the area, which can cause disputes. From now on, environmental conservationists, particularly NGOs, can make themselves heard throughout the new tourism projects. In contrast, investors own real estate and recreational plans for the entire region of the park and the surrounding area: hotel complexes, golf courses, restaurants, modernisation and extension of ski areas. Among these is of course the powerful Slovakian holding company J&T, which is currently the main operator of stations through its subsidiary *Tatry Mountain Resorts*. It has also purchased the main mechanical lifts, part of a hotel resort and various recreational facilities. This group has partially resolved the problems of management capabilities and insufficient investments that arose during the economic transition but has set up a quasi-monopoly that joins the interplay between TANAP and the town of Vysoké Tatry.
- 27 Reconciling the tourism infrastructure with conservation requirements has turned out to be very complicated as the area fit for skiing is situated within the most-protected areas of the national park. Modernising the sports infrastructure without expanding their hold is not possible. In Tatranská Lomnica, *Tatry Mountain Resorts* has completely renovated the slopes by enlarging the descents using snow cannons and using a new material to increase the capacity of gondolas. In Smokovec, they are looking to extend the ski area by interlinking the valleys from Hrebienok to Skalnaté Pleso, over the Studená valley using a new cable car. In Štrbské Pleso, there are also plans for new slopes, both for slalom (descending towards the lake and across the forest) and downhill. Each of these projects

require chopping down trees and obtaining the express approval of TANAP’s supervising ministry, meaning becoming involved in the national political sphere. The importance of the J&T holding company in Slovakia could help advance the progress of these projects.

Entertainment areas

- 28 The great storm of 2004 disrupted visits to the Tatras as a natural space protected by a national park. Natural resources, though little respected by broadening tourism, are gradually transforming into recreational areas, thanks to the increasing number of tourism-related amenities. The trajectory of a complete turn to tourism appears to be getting carried away with maintaining increased visitor levels and guaranteeing the profitability of stations. How to integrate these developments into consistent, sustainable management? Because there is an abundance of experiences on offer: a giant bear welcomes hikers at the foot of Rysy, drums rumble for three hours at Štrbské Pleso for the “Venetian Night” and you can sculpt ice from the last glacier in the Téry chata mountain lodge. Furthermore, tourists have the option to scale Hrebienok on a scooter, by horse-riding or pony-trekking. They can also go tobogganing and sail inflatable boats on the lakes. Where accommodation has been built for a permanent population, there are often closed apartments because the new owners are only there for the ski season. Agencies organise climbing trips up the Gerlach summit or offer stays in a luxury apartment on Lomnický štít. The mountains now resonate with the humming of quad bikes and VIP guests play polo on the frozen Štrbské Pleso lake. Huge forestry machinery can be seen moving around the roads that were walked by sanatorium patients back in the day, abandoned tourist areas are falling into ruin and a truck carries away the wood of dead trees, the last richness of the Tatras. In the midst of all the, the last permanent habitats are no longer aware of living in a national park and therefore approve of its transformation into an amusement park (Marec, 2010).

Conclusion

- 29 By felling the forest, the great storm of 2004 unveiled the incoherence of the management of the mountain environment in the Tatras. The development of the “pocket Alps” was envisaged like that of the actual Alps, perhaps mythologised, and finally disenchantment took hold following the deterioration of the environment, the inability of the infrastructure to absorb the flow of tourists and the disorder created by privatisation. Six of the seven general vulnerability factors¹⁰ extricated by Alexandre Magnan (Magnan, 2012) appear to be compatible with summarising the trajectory of these mountains in an analytic framework:
1. The fact that the physical layout of “the littlest large mountains” is too narrow to hold a town, masses of tourists, multiple activities and protected natural spaces.
 2. The Tatras are directly exposed to natural hazards, primarily to storms. Because of the size (18,000 ha) of its monospecific coverage, this forest has become very sensitive to this hazard. Debates on silvicultural management show an additional fragility in the mountain ecosystem.
 3. The traditional links between the villages of the foothills and the mountains have been broken by various forms of deterritorialisation (population displacement, municipal

restructuring, urbanisation). The restoration of local communities and ownership rights did not manage to calm relations between the local society and its mountain location.

4. This change in the demographic has resulted in a weakening of the natural risk culture among the stakeholders in the tourism industry where the *Tatraci* (those native to the Tatras) are few in number.
 5. The mono-activity centred on tourism makes the economy of the mountains dependent on external events. Incoherent development of tourism, devastated landscapes, crises (adopting the euro, which increased the cost of the destination, the 2008 financial crisis) affected their attractiveness.
 6. Governance of the mountain area is organised in an interplay of stakeholders that includes reinstated local communities (Vysoké Tatry), government bodies (TANAP, administration of national forests – *Štatné lesy*), lobby groups (environmental conservationists, forest owners) and a limited number of nonetheless powerful players in the tourism industry (J&T, hotel groups, private investors).
- 30 Added to this are the other factors in the trajectory of the post-communist transformation: the return of property owners, privatisations that led to other monopolies, weak competitiveness of the productive system in place and the forms of capitalisation coexisting with the effect of a real estate bubble. The establishment of a town within the park turned out to be an environmental disaster marking an irreversible step. No new model of tourism development has emerged, so the spatial matrix of the section of mountain is reliant on "path dependency" from which it cannot escape.

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NOTES

1. Particularly the analyses by TANAP (lesytanap.sk), the town of Vysoké Tatry, the research centre of forest engineering (nlcsk.sk) and the forestry journal lesmedium.sk.
2. Information was collected over three investigative trips to the region carried out in 2016 alongside the town halls of Vysoké Tatry, Štrba and Prybilina, TANAP, fellow geographers and Slovakian sociologists. We learned a great deal from our interview with Anton Marec, a former mountain guide turned writer, who we would like to take the opportunity to thank here.
3. <http://www.lesmedium.sk/casopis-letokruhy/2014/letokruhy-2014-07/ake-vyznamne-kalamity-v-poslednych-rokoch-postihli-nase-lesy>, in the bibliography.
4. Source: <http://www.lesytanap.sk/sk/lykozrutova-kalamita-v-tanape>
5. At the start of the 20th century, Count Hohenlohe owned a large area in the Tatras, with one aim being the conservation of forest resources and preservation of nature (source: https://sk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_Hohenlohe)
6. Slovakia's name during the reign of the Austria-Hungary Empire.
7. Two-party agreement between Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1924 that resolved border disputes.
8. Since the first land registers put in place during the reign of Maria Theresa, this term has referred to the developed zone of the village and the adjoining plots.
9. The urban status of Vysoké Tatry enabled it to offer shops that were rare in the rest of the administered economy, generating significant flows of consumption.
10. By removing "the living conditions of the population" that do not seem to be adapted to the situation in the European mountains.

ABSTRACTS

The extraordinary storm Alžbeta (Elizabeth) of 19 November 2004 destroyed two-thirds of the forest on the slopes of the Slovakian Tatras, unveiling the extent of urbanisation and construction within the National Park. Although tourism in this mountain range started in the mid-19th century, different stages over the course of the 20th century accelerated the transformation of the mountainous surroundings into an urban and recreational area. This area is highly sensitive to natural hazards and geopolitical changes. This article presents the stages of this trajectory and the factors that make these mountains increasingly vulnerable.

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Keywords: transition, Tatras, tourist development

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